DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 274 777 CE 045 047

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TITLE Adult Learning in Self-Help/Mutual Aid Support Groups.
PUB DATE Oct 86
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (Hollywood, FL, October 1986).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Learning; *Adult Programs; Group Structure; *Independent Study; Lifelong Learning; Postsecondary Education; *Self Directed Groups; *Self Help Programs; *Social Support Groups

ABSTRACT

Although the origins of self-help groups can be traced back to early history, the self-help movement as we know it today began almost 50 years ago. Approximately 15 million Americans currently belong to about 500,000 different self-help groups. Adults in transition are likely to seek both formal and informal sources of help when faced with changing life circumstances. Although people who seek self-help within their social network appear to represent a cross section of the general population, those who eventually go to human services tend to be white, young, educated, middle class, and female. The number of inner-city residents and minority group members is surprisingly low. Although many self-help groups have been founded by professionals, most are based on principles of mutual aid and use important and effective mechanisms for learning that are very different from those that most professionals use in private practice. The self-help process involves a number of components, including an empowering self-help philosophy, a support dimension, a therapeutic aspect, a spiritual or missionizing element, and an educational component. Self-help groups tend to take on very diverse oganizational forms, with very different degrees of formal versus informal structure and very different ways and degrees of involving professionals in their activities. Regardless of the form it takes, however, the self-help group can serve as an important forum for self-directed adult learning throughout the life span. (MN)

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AAACE

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR ADULT AND CONTINUING EDUCATION

OCTOBER 22-26, 1986

HOLLYWOOD, FLORIDA

ADULT LEARNING IN SELF-HELP MUTUAL/AID SUPPORT GROUPS

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Adult Learning in Self-Help Mutual/Aid Support Groups

presented by Myrna Lynn Hammerman

INTRODUCTION

On March 6, 1982 I attended a symposium at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois entitled "Education for the Life Span in an Informational Society." Included in the select roster of guest speakers at the symposium were such eminent professors as Dr. Alan Knox, who spoke on education for the life span, and Dr. Bernice Neugarten who talked about how the individual in adult development relates to adult education. I had heard about this gathering through Sharan Merriam who was teaching one of the classes that I was taking as a doctoral student in the department of Adult and Continuing Education at Northern Illinois University. The course that I was taking from Dr. Merriam was referred to as "Maturity Through Old Age," and I had contracted with Sharan to critique the life span symposium in order to fulfill a self-directed learning assignment that was one of the course requirements. I had no idea when I walked into the auditorium that cold, dismal, winter morning that I was about to embark on a whole new life experience as well as on a new area of academic interest.

One of the many speakers at the life span symposium was Dr. Leonard Borman, a social anthropologist, who had given up his professorship at Northwestern University to start the Self-Help Center, an informational and research clearinghouse for self-help mutual/aid support groups that is also located in Evanston. In my critique for Sharan's class I wrote:

> Of all of the presentations at the symposium, this was the one to which I responded the most. This is an area that I found to be of great interest to me and it ties in very well with learning for the life span ... This is an area that I plan to investigate as a possible subject area for my dissertation. (Hammerman, 1982 p.11)

Sharon scrawled in the margin, "I liked it too!"

After the symposium I made it a point to introduce myself to Dr. Borman. He told me that a number of doctoral students from various academic disciplines had written dissertations on self-help with the aid of the resources and staff at the Self-Help Center, and he very graciously encouraged me to come and visit the center. I took him up on his invitation. Thus began a short but memorable professional association with Len Borman.

Leonard Borman died in the fall of 1985 after a brief but valiant battle with leukemia. When he discovered that he was ill, he became an active participant in a cancer support group that was started by one of his former protegees. He experienced first hand the self-help process that he had observed as a researcher and about which he had extensively written. Today I am here hoping to do for you essentially what Leonard Borman did for me back in March of 1982 - acquaint you with the idea of lifelong learning through self-help and mutual aid. But since my personal experience has been to conduct my research in the area of self-help and self-directed learning, I would also like to introduce you to the notion of self-help as a unique form of self-directed learning that contains the inherent capacity to span the life cycle.

WHAT IS SELF-HELP?

Many different meanings can be attributed to the term "self-help." For purposes of this presentation, "self-help" refers to the process that takes place within small, voluntary, peer run, mutual aid support groups that offer participants the opportunity to work together to overcome or cope with a common concern or problem. While Katz and Bender (1976) trace the origins of self-help groups back to early history when the family and a small group of neighbors constituted the primary resources for mutual aid, the self-help movement, as we know it today, began almost fifty years ago

in the United States with the advent of Alcoholics Anonymous. Since that time there has been a tremendous proliferation of a variety of different kinds of self-help agencies. According to Reissman (1985) there are currently about 500,000 self-help groups, and 15 million Americans have become members. In the Chicago metropolitan area alone the 1986 Directory of Self Help Mutual Aid Groups published by The Self Help Center that was founded by Leonard Borman lists over 800 different self-help groups and contains more than 225 pages. (Raff and Andersen, 1986)

Adults in transition seek both formal and informal sources of help when faced with life circumstances, says Lieberman (1979), who found that five percent of his reinterviewed respondents used self-help groups when turning to some resource for help over a four year period of time. Noting that people who seek self-help within their social network appear to represent a cross section of the general population, Lieberman points out that those who eventually go to human service agencies and/or become members of self-help groups tend to be young, white, educated, middle class and female. He concludes that, given a set of life problems, a small but meaningful number of adults turn to self-help groups for aid. Farquharson (1975) reports that members of self-help groups tend to be white collar, middle-class and to have more available supports in the form of concerned spouse or employment capability. While Lieberman (1979) speculates on the success of recent efforts to link public services and lower-class consumers, Jason, Tabon, Tait, Iacono, Goodman, Watkins and Huggins (1986), find that the number of self-help groups to be found in the inner city among the indigent and minority populations is surprisingly low.

Although many self-help groups have been founded by professionals (Lieberman and Borman, 1979), most of them are based on principles of mutual aid and they employ important and effective mechanisms for learning that are very different from what most professionals do in

private practice. Lieberman and Borman (1979) insist that it is a myth that these groups are antiprofessional. The professional issues within the mental health literature on self-help groups appear to mainly have to do with concerns over whether the groups are peer or professionally led, how much autonomy the groups are permitted by their sponsoring agencies if they have them, and whether lay people are qualified to help one another. Observation reveals that some groups work well with concerned professionals who do not share their problem, others prefer to be without professional guidance, professional speakers are invited to educational meetings in many groups, and a number of groups use peer professionals as leaders. No two groups are alike even though many groups have national organizations that set up guidelines for their procedures. The bottom line is that people who go through similar experiences often gain valuable insights, information and support from one another that is not readily available from those who have not lived through the same kinds of problems. What they learn is the result of shared experience rather than training and it does not preclude turning to loved ones and friends nor the use of professionals for help outside of their groups.

How Self-Help Works

There are a number of components to the self-help process. There is an empowering self-help philosophy that enables group members to gain control over their lives by teaching them how to feel and use their own strengths and power. (Gartner and Riessman, 1977) Self-help contains a support dimension - an extensive network of caring friends (Borman, 1986); a therapeutic aspect that has to do with helping oneself through helping others that Riessman (1965) has termed the helper-therapy principle; a spiritual and/or missionizing element that Killilea (1976) refers to as a secular religion; and, last but not least, an educational component that consists of the unique experiential teachings or

"ideologies" of each group (Antze, 1979) which in many cases become routine as they evolve into established practices.

In addition to the special ideologies practiced by many self-help groups, outsiders are often invited to open "educational" meetings to present programs of interest to members, and self-help groups are constantly using their own as well as outside material resources such as books, video tapes, T.V. programs, newspaper and magazine articles, etc.. A large range of methods, materials and formats for learning can be found upon observing different kinds of self-help groups, and self-help groups are known to have a life of their own in that many of them are continuous and enduring even though the participants many not be.

From an organizational perspective self-help groups tend to take diverse forms. According to Borman (1979) these groups offer a network approach to an identified population for which they provide information, support and other help. They are neither professional systems nor informal networks but fall somewhere in-between. Ignored by educators because they are outside of the traditional boundary lines of education, self-help groups have been adopted by the mental health community as a unique form of group therapy. Although a great deal of adult learning is reported to take place in self-help groups, there is little research specifically focused on the learning process within self-help groups in the self-help literature to date. In fact, Borman spoke of the need for research on the self-help process at the Life Span Symposium in 1982, and implored educators not to overlook self-help groups as valuable educational communities. Because he recognized the incredible impact of informal mutual aid and help as a form of education, he devoted the last twelve years of his life to its promotion.

When I originally read the mental health literature on self-help, I discovered some remarkable similarities between what the mental health professionals had to say about self-help and what the adult educators had to say about self-directed learning. As a result of that discovery I subsequently decided to write my thesis on the subject of self-help as a group form of self-directed learning. I have just finished collecting my data and I have also written a thorough review of the literature on both self-directed learning and self-help. Based upon my literature review, my observations of self-help groups in action, interviews with self-help group members, and personal experience as a member of a self-help group, I am convinced that self-help is very closely related to the adult education construct of self-directed learning and contains tremendous potential as an exciting, creative forum for important personal learning throughout the life span.

Mezirow (1985) recognizes the importance of authenticity to self-directed learning and I believe that it is the authenticity of the learning that takes place within self-help groups that is one of its greatest strengths. Basically self-help groups consist of people trying to do the very best that they can do to help themselves and others who share their problem, often under extremely trying circumstances. Nevertheless, one does not have to have a terminal illness to benefit from the self-help process. Leonard Borman knew that! If you are human you have problems, and you can be sure that there are other people out there with the same kinds of problems. With self-help, people get together to learn from one another the things that they cannot learn from people who do not understand what it feels like to have dealt with their kinds of problems. It is also important to note that this is done in a warm, supportive, accepting environment that allows members to lower their defenses and engage in open, trusting, authentic dialogue with one another. Over and

over again during the course of my research, people have told me that being a member of a self-help group has taught them to really listen to what people are saying and to be as non-judgemental as possible of themselves and others. A beneficial side affect is that in trying to be honest with themselves as well as with one another, and in sincerely trying to understand the other person's position so as to be able to respond appropriately, participants learn how to help themselves and others at the same time.

More and more people are discovering the benefits of the self-help process. They are finding comfort as well as meaningful learning in an inexpensive, less competitive, more supportive, relatively autonomous group environment than that which can be found in more traditional settings. That is why self-help groups are becoming so popular. I conducted my research in four very different kinds of peer led self-help groups. Each one was unique, creative and effective in its own way. All of the groups were well attended and the information and support that was shared was much appreciated and openly acknowledged by the participants. There was a genuine feeling of warmth, belonging, acceptance, trust and understanding in the self-help groups that I observed, qualities that are difficult to find in more traditional learning environments. The self-help atmosphere tends to nourish introspective understanding and personal growth.

Crossman (1980) examines the potential of applying a self-help model to remedial adult education classes and I have seen students respond extremely well to a self-help model in my literacy classes. There are endless ways in which a supportive, self-help learning model can be creatively and successfully incorporated into adult education programs as well as into other institutional settings. From my own perspective, I have applied what I have learned from and about self-help to my work and to my

life, and I am grateful for what it has taught me about myself and others.

Because I believe in self-help as a particularly valuable group form of self-directed learning, I hope that the information about the self-help process that I have shared with you this afternoon will stimulate you to think about this uniquely personal kind of group learning in terms of what it can do for you as well as how it can benefit those with whom you work. I am speaking from my own experience as a member of a self-help group when I tell you that it is a great relief to discover that we do not have to shoulder the burden of our struggle with real life problems alone. There are people out there who need those of us who share their concerns to step forward and give self-help a chance. We can help ourselves by reaching out to help others. We go for our own purposes but the end result is that everyone profits. I have found it to be a very special experience. Self-help has provided me with a valuable new forum for meaningful learning that will be available to me for the rest of my life. Perhaps you will decide to join me in realizing its benefits.

This presentation is to be followed by a question and answer period and, if time allows, a participatory learning activity related to self-help.

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